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## Study Guide

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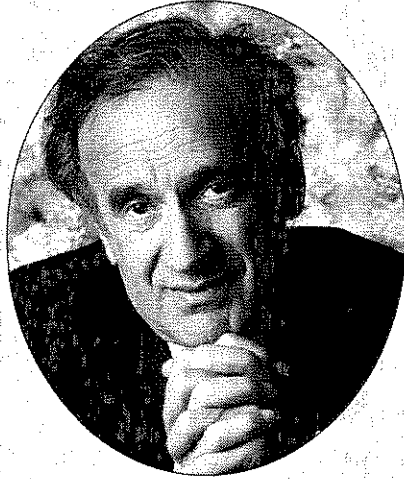
# Night

by Elie Wiesel



New York, New York   Columbus, Ohio   Woodland Hills, California   Peoria, Illinois

# Meet Elie Wiesel



*Look, it's important to bear witness. Important to tell your story. . . . You cannot imagine what it meant spending a night of death among death.*

—Elie Wiesel

The obligation Elie Wiesel feels to justify his survival of a Nazi concentration camp has shaped his destiny. It has guided his work as a writer, teacher, and humanitarian activist; influenced his interaction with his Jewish faith; and affected his family and personal choices. Since World War II, Wiesel has borne witness to persecution past and present. He has sought to understand humankind's capacity for evil, halt its progress, and heal the wounds it has caused.

Wiesel did not expect to be a novelist and journalist when he grew up. His early writings focused on the Bible and spiritual issues. The studious and deeply religious only son of a Jewish family in the village of Sighet, Romania, Wiesel spent his childhood days of the 1930s and 1940s studying sacred Jewish texts. Wiesel's mother, an educated woman for her time, encouraged her son's intense interest in Judaism. Wiesel's early love of stories, especially those told by his grandfather, may explain why he became a storyteller himself.

In 1944 during World War II, Wiesel's life took a profoundly unexpected turn when

Germany's armies invaded Sighet. He and his family were sent to concentration camps at Auschwitz and at Buna, both in Poland. His imprisonment, which he describes in horrifying detail in *Night*, forever changed Wiesel as a man and as a Jew.

Wiesel was freed in April 1945, when he was sixteen years old. He went to a French orphanage and was later reunited with his older sisters. Wiesel completed his education, working as a tutor and translator to fund his schooling. Before long, Wiesel was writing for both French and Jewish publications. Still, he did not—and vowed he would not—write about the Holocaust, saying years later, “You must speak, but how can you, when the full story is beyond language.” He did not break this vow until he began writing *Night*, his own memoir.

Wiesel settled in the United States in 1956. He continued to write about the Holocaust. Wiesel's largely autobiographical novels, *Dawn* and *The Accident*, further explore his role as a survivor. His novels *The Town Beyond the Wall* and *The Gates of the Forest* focus on other aspects of the Holocaust. Wiesel's play, *The Trial of God*, challenges God to provide an explanation for allowing so much suffering to occur.

Wiesel, who married Holocaust survivor Marion Erster Rose in 1969, has worked against oppression and persecution around the world. He feels a special obligation to speak out against injustice. Toward that end, he teaches humanities at Boston University and contributes his energies to a range of humanitarian organizations. Wiesel helped organize and found the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. He hopes to broadcast his belief that persecution is an experience all people must recognize and protest. In accepting the Nobel Peace Prize in 1986 for his activism and courageous works, Wiesel summed up his call to action:

*Sometimes we must interfere . . .  
Wherever men or women are persecuted  
because of their race, religion, or political  
views, that place must—at that moment—  
become the center of the universe.*

# Introducing the Memoir

*Never shall I forget that nocturnal silence which deprived me, for all eternity, of the desire to live. Never shall I forget those moments which murdered my God and my soul and turned my dreams to dust.*

—Elie Wiesel in *Night*

These are the author's own words, describing his arrival at the concentration camp that would claim the life of his mother and younger sister. According to critic Kenneth Turan, Wiesel's memoir commands readers to feel "the inexpressible nausea and revulsion that a simple recitation of statistics never manages to arouse."

*Night* begins in 1941 in Wiesel's Eastern European village of Sighet. As World War II consumes Europe, Wiesel and the other Jews of Sighet still feel safe. An intensely religious young man, Wiesel spends his days studying sacred Jewish texts. By 1944, however, the Germans occupy Sighet and Wiesel's struggle to survive begins. Wiesel is deported to a Nazi concentration camp where he faces terrifying brutality, the tormenting losses of family and friends, a changing relationship with his father, and an intense challenge to his religious faith. Through young Wiesel's eyes, readers travel into the hell of Hitler's death camps and into the darkness of a long night in the history of the human race.

Wiesel wrote *Night* nearly ten years after the end of World War II. In an interview with noted French Catholic writer and humanitarian François Mauriac, he was inspired to break an earlier vow of silence he had made about the Holocaust. Mauriac urged Wiesel to tell his tale, to hold the world accountable. The resulting 800-page Yiddish manuscript, *And the World Remained Silent*, was the material from which the considerably shorter *Night* evolved. In its shorter version, Wiesel's memoir was published first in France and later—after much resistance due to its distressing subject—in the United States. Slowly, it gathered force and has since been read by millions.

Though the story is written in narrative form, it is not a novel. As a memoir, *Night* is a brief autobiographical work in which the author

recounts events he has witnessed and introduces people he has known. It is the first of many attempts Wiesel has made to honor these people, many now long dead, and to tell their horrible stories. With *Night* Wiesel also begins an attempt to find some human or divine explanation for the events he witnessed. For a man raised with deep religious faith, reconciling Nazi actions with Judaism has been a life-directing task.

Since *Night*'s American publication in 1960, Elie Wiesel's willingness to share his own story has helped turn the tide of world discussion. After the end of World War II, many people—Jews and non-Jews alike—did not want to think or talk about the horrible events that had occurred. They wanted to avoid the responsibility that might fall on individuals, governments, and organizations who knowingly, or unknowingly, allowed the Holocaust to happen. Some even tried to deny that the Holocaust actually took place. The works of Elie Wiesel ring out in protest against that absurdity and demand that people remember. As he said in a *People* magazine interview:

*the only way to stop the next holocaust . . . is to remember the last one. If the Jews were singled out then, in the next one we are all the victims.*

## THE TIME AND PLACE

*Night* takes place in Europe (Romania, Poland, and Germany) during World War II (1939–1945). This war, sparked by German aggression, had its roots in the ending of an earlier war. With Germany's defeat in World War I, the nation was left with a broken government, a severely limited military, shattered industry and transportation, and an economy sinking under the strain of war debts. Many Germans were humiliated and demoralized.

The Nazi party—in German NAZI stands for National Socialist German Workers Party—came to power in the late 1920s. The party, through its leader Adolf Hitler, offered to restore German pride. At large rallies Hitler spoke of Germany's long military tradition, its national character, and its entitlement to greatness. To explain Germany's

fallen state, Hitler blamed the Jews and others whom he said were not true Germans. Many Germans responded enthusiastically to Hitler's ideas, and in 1933 he became chancellor, or leader, of the country.

Once in power, Hitler was able to restore Germany's economy and its military. He used that progress to support his expansion efforts, unchecked by Allied countries struggling with the worldwide Great Depression. In 1938 Hitler

began invading the lands around Germany. Britain and France declared war in 1939. The United States did not enter the war until 1941.

In 1941, when *Night* begins, Hitler seemed unstoppable. By 1942 he controlled or was allied with most of Europe, including Wiesel's Romania, which was pro-German. As the story progresses, Wiesel is confined in a total of three concentration camps, Auschwitz and Buna, in Poland, and later Buchenwald, in central Germany.

### Did You Know?

Hitler's treatment of the Jews was more than a political strategy. He was an anti-Semite (hater of Jews) who viewed the Jews as an inferior race. In fact, Judaism is not a race, but rather a religion. Soon after taking control of Germany, Hitler began persecuting German Jews. They lost their citizenship and often their right to work, were barred from public schools and gathering places, could no longer marry non-Jews, and suffered frequent physical attacks to their homes and businesses.

Hitler defined as Jews those with at least one Jewish grandparent, whether or not they observed their religion. By 1938, before the War spread beyond Germany, Hitler and his secret-police organization, the Gestapo, had

already imprisoned more than 30,000 Jews. In keeping with his goal of achieving German racial "purity," Hitler also attacked and imprisoned Gypsies, people with handicaps, and homosexuals. Those who disagreed with Hitler's political views—Communists, Jehovah's Witnesses, Soviet and Slavic prisoners of war—were also mercilessly imprisoned, enslaved, and murdered. As Hitler's control of Europe spread, more and more innocent people were imprisoned or killed. Some were forced to live in ghettos, enclosed areas within cities, where they often starved. Others were executed or sent to the rapidly expanding camp system. By the end of the war, at least six million Jews and five million non-Jews had

# Before You Read

## *Night* chapters 1 and 2

### FOCUS ACTIVITY

What events can suddenly change the course of a person's life?

#### Discuss

In a small group, discuss events that unexpectedly change people's lives—a natural disaster or death of a loved one, for example. Discuss possible effects and emotional reactions you or others might have to each event.

#### Setting a Purpose

Read to find out how young Elie Wiesel's life is profoundly and forever changed.

### BACKGROUND

#### Time and Place

The town of Sighet, where *Night* begins, has been part of both Romania and Hungary at various times. During Wiesel's childhood, Sighet was home to 15,000 Jews. Most were devout Hasidic Jews whose lives focused on family, religion, and learning. Like most of their Jewish neighbors, the Wiesels were poor but intensely committed to education. For young Elie that meant spending his days and evenings studying sacred Jewish texts such as the Torah and Talmud. At the age of twelve, Wiesel began exploring *cabbala*, or Jewish mysticism—an approach to Bible study that analyzes hidden meanings in the text.

As World War II progressed, Wiesel's father Chlomo began helping Jews escape from Poland, risking his life to help others escape Nazi persecution. Chlomo continued to believe that he and his family would not be separated.

#### Did You Know?

Judaism dates back nearly 4,000 years. It shares many ideas with—and in fact is an ancestor to—both Christianity and Islam. These three religions all originated in the same part of the world, the area we now call the Middle East. The sacred texts of all three religions overlap in several ways. The Hebrew Bible is what Christians call the Old Testament. Many of these Bible stories also appear in the Islamic sacred text, the Qur'an.

Two important Jewish holy days are Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. Rosh Hashanah is the Jewish New Year and usually occurs in September. Ten days later comes Yom Kippur, which is a day of fasting and atonement. Passover is a springtime ritual that celebrates the Jews' escape from slavery in Egypt.

### VOCABULARY PREVIEW

**compatriots** [kəm pā'trē əts] *n.* fellow countrymen

**edict** [ē'dikt] *n.* official statement; law

**expound** [iks paʊnd'] *v.* to set forth in detail

**firmament** [fur'mə mənt] *n.* the sky, or heavens

**hermetically** [hur met'ik ē] *adv.* completely sealed; airtight

**pestilential** [pes'tə lən'shəl] *adj.* filled with disease; contagious

**phylacteries** [fi lak'tər ēz] *n.* small boxes containing scripture; worn by some Jewish men for daily prayer

**pillage** [pil'ij] *v.* to rob with open violence

**premonition** [prē'mə nish'ən] *n.* anticipation of an event, usually negative, even without actual warning

**truncheon** [trun'chən] *n.* a police officer's stick

# Active Reading

## ***Night* chapters 1 and 2**

In chapters 1 and 2, a number of significant things happen to Elie Wiesel and the other Jews of Sighet. As you read this section, look for important events and for how people respond to them. List some key events in the Event column. In the Response column identify how Wiesel and the other Sighet Jews respond. In the third column, write what happens next in the story. Discuss whether or not the villagers' responses to events influenced, at least in part, events that followed.

Event	Response	What happens next
Moché the Beadle is deported because he is a foreign Jew.		

# Responding

## *Night* chapters 1 and 2

### Personal Response

What is your reaction to Moché the Beadle? What do you think about his treatment by the villagers after his return from Poland?

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### Analyzing Literature

#### Recall and Interpret

1. Describe Wiesel's community at the beginning of the story. How does young Elie view the world and his place in it?

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2. What are some incidents that suggest or foreshadow the coming danger to the Sighet Jews? Why doesn't the community believe it is in danger?

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3. What are the conditions on the Jews' train journey? How do the Jews react to Madame Schächter's behavior? What does this reveal about human nature?

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# Responding

## *Night* chapters 1 and 2

### Analyzing Literature (*continued*)

#### Evaluate and Connect

4. What connection might there be between Madame Schächter's treatment on the train and possible future events in the concentration camp? What are some other ways that Wiesel foreshadows, or hints at, the horrors ahead?

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5. Even though it was 1944, and Nazi extermination of Jews had begun years earlier, the Sighet Jews had very few facts about it. Do you think it is possible in today's world for a community to know so little, to be so unprepared? Explain.

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### Literature and Writing

#### Personal Letter

Wiesel explains that Moché the Beadle flees Sighet when the Germans arrest leaders in the Jewish community. Think back to your response in the **Focus Activity**. Assuming that Moché has escaped to freedom, what would you want to say to him about his situation? What feelings would you want to express about the dire circumstances in which his fellow villagers find themselves? On a separate piece of paper, write a letter to Moché expressing your thoughts.

#### Extending Your Response

##### Literature Groups

As an adult, Wiesel notes throughout the early chapters of his memoir that the Sighet Jews did not, or would not, believe the fate that lay in store for them. Suppose they had possessed the knowledge we now have of Hitler's goals and methods. What different choices might they have made? In your group, discuss and develop plans community leaders might have made to save the Jews. Consider various resistance and flight options.

##### Social Studies Connection

Learn more about the laws Hitler created to persecute Jews. How did Hitler persuade the German people and government to construct a legal system for mass murder? On what elements of human nature did he capitalize? How were terror tactics involved? Then examine the text in chapters 1 and 2 to identify those laws which affected Wiesel's life directly.



*Save your work for your portfolio.*



# Before You Read

## *Night* chapters 3 through 5

### FOCUS ACTIVITY

How have you reacted when faced with danger, whether to you or someone else?

#### Web It

Create a cluster web, with *danger* written in the center circle. In circles radiating from the center, list possible reactions to dangerous situations. In other circles coming off of the reaction circles, brainstorm possible consequences of those reactions.

#### Setting a Purpose

Read to find out how Wiesel responds to many dangerous situations.

### BACKGROUND

#### Time and Place

The Nazis opened the first concentration camp in 1933, soon after Hitler became German Chancellor. In the years leading up to war, Hitler imprisoned thousands more people. Once Hitler began invading other lands, the demand for camps skyrocketed. Jews imprisoned during these early years were often kept only long enough to convince them to flee German-held lands. Many did, though without going far enough to escape later reimprisonment. Auschwitz, where Wiesel was initially taken, opened in 1940. With its reception centers, such as Birkenau, Auschwitz eventually became the largest of the camps.

In 1941 Hitler invaded Russia and was plunged into the first long battle of the war. He needed supplies and weapons. Thus, many of the camps became forced labor centers that used prisoners to fuel the Nazi death machine. In 1942, at the Wannsee Conference, Hitler and his allies developed the official policy known as the “final solution.” Under this plan, Jews in particular would be worked until they collapsed and then they would be killed. Hitler’s scientists first experimented with “mercy killings” on people who were mentally ill. Methods for mass murders, such as lethal injection and poisonous gas, were later developed. Gas chambers were added to six camps. In these camps, mass extermination began in earnest. More than 1.25 million people were killed at Auschwitz alone.

#### Did You Know?

Insufficient food and the lack of a balanced diet led to malnutrition and starvation for many concentration camp prisoners. When people are undernourished, their bodies cannot grow or repair themselves properly. People lose weight and are more likely to fall ill. Children who are still growing suffer even more problems. Some common diseases that result from malnutrition are scurvy and beriberi, in which a lack of vitamins and minerals weaken bones and cause stomach problems.

### VOCABULARY PREVIEW

**bestial** [bes'chəl] *adj.* like a beast or animal

**blandishments** [blan'dish mənts] *n.* something used to coax

**crucible** [krōō'sə bəl] *n.* container for cooking at high heat

**emaciated** [i mǎ's hē āt'əd] *adj.* marked by abnormal thinness caused by starvation or disease

**leprous** [lep'rəs] *adj.* showing signs of leprosy, which is an infectious disease that affects body tissue

**manacle** [man'ə kəl] *v.* to handcuff

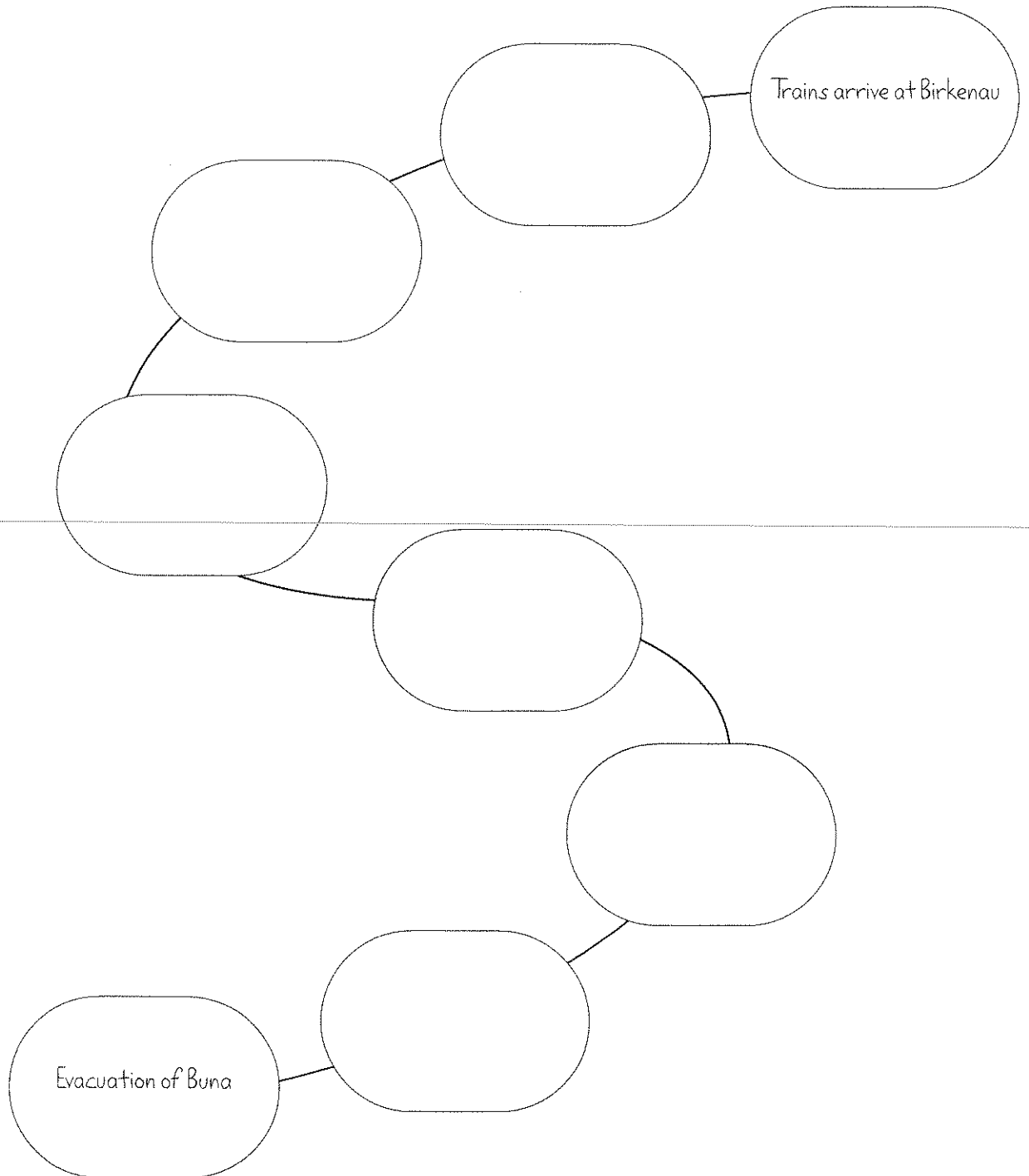
**queue** [kū] *n.* waiting line

**wizened** [wiz'ənd] *adj.* dry, shrunken, wrinkled

# Active Reading

## ***Night* chapters 3 through 5**

As you read chapters 3 through 5, complete the flow chart below by listing in chronological order the major events that occur from the arrival of the trains at Birkenau to the evacuation of Buna. Add more circles if necessary.



# Responding

## *Night* chapters 3 through 5

### Personal Response

When he arrives at Auschwitz and then at Buna, Wiesel describes scenes he will never forget. What scenes, ideas, or feelings from the memoir do you find unforgettable?

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### Analyzing Literature

#### Recall and Interpret

1. Describe the conditions first at the Birkenau reception center, then at Auschwitz, and later at Buna. How does Wiesel's relationship with his father change during this time?

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2. What events lead to the two hangings Wiesel describes? How does Wiesel feel about his evening meal after each hanging? What do his reactions suggest about how he is changing?

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3. What are some ways that Wiesel and the other Jews at the camps try to observe their religion? How have Wiesel's feelings about God changed since his captivity began?

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# Responding

## *Night* chapters 3 through 5

### Analyzing Literature (*continued*)

#### Evaluate and Connect

4. In the camps, Wiesel must struggle to stay alive and to remain human. In your opinion, how well does he succeed with his struggles?

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5. There are several discussions about resistance by the prisoners. Why do you think there was no large scale effort to resist?

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### Literature and Writing

#### Persuasive Essay

On Yom Kippur, the day of atonement, Jews traditionally fast to show God that they are sorry for their sins and to ask forgiveness. Only those over the age of thirteen and those who are healthy must fast. The imprisoned Jews discuss whether or not fasting is appropriate under the life or death conditions of the camp. Recall and consider your **Focus Activity** on page 16. Write a short essay on whether the prisoners should fast.

#### Extending Your Response

##### Literature Groups

Throughout this section, Wiesel uses language related to death, darkness, night, and decay to convey the horrors around him. In your groups, divide up the section's text. Reread to identify examples of this recurring language. Then discuss the images this language evokes. Create some simple drawings of these images and exchange them with group members. As a class, discuss the overall effect of Wiesel's language.

##### Science Connection

Wiesel says he had become "a starved stomach." Try to estimate how much food a fifteen-year-old needs to thrive and grow. Read about calories as a measure of energy consumed and expended. Identify caloric amounts in some common foods. Make a list of what Wiesel may have eaten on any given day. Determine how many calories Wiesel was consuming a day and compare his diet to that of an average fifteen-year-old.



**Save your work for your portfolio.**

# Before You Read

## Night chapters 6 through 9

### FOCUS ACTIVITY

What does it mean to feel hopeless? How do you think hopelessness affects people's lives?

#### Quickwrite

Describe on paper a time when you or a friend felt hopeless. What circumstances caused this feeling? How did you or your friend respond to the situation?

#### Setting a Purpose

Read to find out how Wiesel confronts and responds to the increasing hopelessness of his situation.

### BACKGROUND

#### Time and Place

The Allies invaded Europe on D-Day, June 6, 1944. At the time of Wiesel's imprisonment in 1944, Germany was already losing the war. This reality only inflamed Hitler's desire to exterminate the Jews. Gassings and mass shootings escalated despite calls from the German army for more war production laborers. Many camps were closed in the spring of 1944, not long after Wiesel had reached Auschwitz. While many non-Jews were sent to labor camps, many Jews were sent to the Auschwitz gas chambers.

#### Did You Know?

Psychologists who study Holocaust survivors have recognized a pattern of reaction to the concentration camp experience. At first, prisoners were stunned and paralyzed by the horror. Many did not survive this early shock, in fact, the highest death toll was among new prisoners. Even if they weren't selected for death, they fell ill, were grief-stricken by the loss of family members, became exhausted, or simply gave up hope in the face of evil. Those who survived these early experiences recovered some sense of balance. Many have reported that they separated themselves from their surroundings and even their bodies. They focused on surviving one day at a time. With each new onslaught of horror or loss, prisoners repeated this process. Some people became what prisoners called *muselmänner* or "walking dead." If a prisoner fell into this state for too long, death was probably imminent. Viktor E. Frankl's book, *Man's Search for Meaning*, offers insightful clues as to why some people survived the psychological horror of concentration camps and others did not.

### VOCABULARY PREVIEW

**contagion** [kən tə'jən] *n.* an influence that spreads rapidly

**embarkation** [em 'bär kă'shən] *n.* beginning of a journey

**encumbrance** [en kum'brəns] *n.* burden

**indeterminate** [in'di tə'rmi nit] *adj.* vague, not fixed in advance

**rivet** [riv'it] *v.* to hold attention tightly, as if physically attached

**semblance** [sem'bləns] *n.* outward appearance, but with a sense of falsity

**vigilance** [vij'ləns] *n.* state of extreme watchfulness

# Active Reading

## ***Night* chapters 6 through 9**

In this section, Wiesel is pushed closer and closer toward hopelessness and death. His inexplicable will to live and the realities of life pull him back again and again. As you read, think about the events and emotions that influence Wiesel's zigzag journey between death and life. In the chart below, record examples of events that create a sense of hopelessness and events that provide hope.

Hopelessness and Death		Hope and Life
pain in foot, exhaustion, death seems a release	→	His father needs Wiesel's support, Wiesel cannot abandon him
	→	
	→	
	→	
	→	
	→	
	→	

# Responding

## *Night* chapters 6 through 9

### Personal Response

What feelings and thoughts went through your mind as you read about Wiesel's final experiences as a German prisoner? What would you say if you could talk to him about this time in his life? What would you want him to explain to you?

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### Analyzing Literature

#### Recall and Interpret

1. Why do Wiesel and his father leave Buna? How do they respond to the circumstances of the forced march?

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2. What happens between Rabbi Eliahou and his son? What does Wiesel's reaction to this incident reveal about his relationship with God?

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3. How does Wiesel treat his father during the journey to Buchenwald and later during Chlomo's illness? How does Wiesel's link to his father affect his will to survive?

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# Responding

## *Night* chapters 6 through 9

### Analyzing Literature (*continued*)

#### Evaluate and Connect

4. Given their life or death situation, do you believe Wiesel's attitude toward his father was understandable? Explain your reactions.

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5. Wiesel believes that remembering the Holocaust will help to ensure that this type of atrocity does not occur in the future. Do you think learning about historical events can guide people to behave differently? Explain.

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### Literature and Writing

#### Differences in Language

Compare and contrast the language in chapters 6 through 9 with that of chapters 1 through 5. Based on the differences in vocabulary and dialogue, what kinds of physical and emotional changes do you think Wiesel, his father, and the other prisoners experience during their final months of imprisonment? Write your evaluation in a brief essay.

### Extending Your Response

#### Literature Groups

According to political scientist Raul Hilberg, Holocaust survivors shared these common features: "realism, rapid decision making, and tenacious holding on to life." In your group, find and reread passages in which various prisoners combat the urge to give up hope. Recall your **Focus Activity** writings as you discuss the results of prisoners' choices. Consider: Why do some prisoners give up hope? What kinds of events impact their loss of hope? What, if any, inner or outer forces, help the survivors to endure?

#### Learning for Life

Imagine you are an Allied soldier who helps liberate prisoners from a concentration camp. Write a report to your commanding officer explaining the situation you encountered. Use passages and details from the book, along with information gathered from background readings, to generate an accurate, objective description of your findings.

#### Performing

View one or more films about the Holocaust. Work in small groups to script a scene from *Night* for a film version. Select or create appropriate background music. Perform your scene for the class, videotaping it if possible.



**Save your work for your portfolio.**



